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ABSTRACT

A study demonstrated the viability of an instructional paradigm that identifies adult mediation within the zone of proximal development to be a significant factor in young children's learning. Six teachers participated during the first year and eight teachers during the second year. Complete data were collected for 200 kindergarten children. Research-practitioner-based components were created using results from previous kindergarten studies. Underlying each component was the recognition by the teachers that the following were integral to mediate and support children's learning: (1) structural analysis; (2) scaffolding; (3) mediation; and (4) modeling. Children in the project classes performed significantly better on the majority of reading and writing tasks administered at the end of kindergarten. Of particular importance was the children's performance on measures not specifically related to the treatment, indicating that a level of generalization had been achieved. (Two tables of data are included, and 27 references are attached.) (MG)

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Technical Report No. 517

IMPLEMENTING EARLY LITERACY: PROMISING SUCCESS FOR ALL KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN

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Abstract

This study demonstrates the viability of an instructional paradigm that identifies adult mediation within the zone of proximal development to be a significant factor in young children's learning. Research-practitioner-based components were created using results from previous kindergarten studies. Underlying each component was the recognition by the teachers that the following were integral to mediate and support children's learning: (a) structural analysis, (b) scaffolding, (c) mediation, and (d) modeling. Children in the project classes performed significantly better on the majority of reading and writing tasks administered at the end of kindergarten. Of particular importance was the children's performance on measures not specifically related to the treatment, indicating that a level of generalization had been achieved.

IMPLEMENTING EARLY LITERACY: PROMISING SUCCESS FOR ALL KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN

The Early Literacy Project (ELP) is a research-based reading and writing program that aims to provide successful literacy experiences for all kindergarten children. The ELP utilizes a two-tiered intervention in which teachers are taught to use new intervention techniques and then are observed and supported as they carry out the intervention for their students. In this work, it is assumed that literacy concepts begin to develop at home and in kindergarten through the support and encouragement of parents, kindergarten teachers, and more knowledgeable peers. Instruction, both for teachers and their students, is founded on principles established by Vygotsky (1962, 1978). Learning takes place in formal and informal social interchanges that feature what the learner knows and is beginning to understand.

The ELP model is based on the premise that acquisition of literacy knowledge is a didactic process that occurs primarily through mediation between the learner and another more knowledgeable person. New information is presented in such a way that the learner always succeeds but also continues to be challenged to gain new insights. The process requires the tutor to operate within the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), to provide a meaningful structure for understanding new concepts and tasks (scaffold), and to lead the learner toward self-directed monitoring of learning activities. Tutors recognize the elements of the learner's knowledge base through questions and observations. They also clear up misconceptions or exceptions to the situation and then fill in the relevant information that the learner needs for making meaningful constructions of new concepts.

Instructional components that were developed for the ELP are: (a) Morning Message, (b) Predictable Little Book Reading, (c) Process Writing, and (d) Trade Book Reading. In addition, teachers were provided ideas for: (a) Instructional Assessment, (b) Professional Development, and (c) Parental Support.

The selection of instructional components for the ELP was based on several assumptions. One is that introducing print in a meaningful context and providing structural analysis at children's level of literacy understanding leads to deeper understanding and is expressed later in higher reading skills (Mason & Allen, 1986). Opportunities to read and write in a problem-solving, game-like atmosphere leads to a positive attitude toward reading and writing (Kawakami, Oshiro, & Farran, 1989). Tasks in which children read partly by relying on context and partly by seeing oft-repeated phrases allow children to develop confidence in their reading and to use varying sources of information (Clay, 1979). They are helped by tutors who model the task, monitor the process of learning (Clay, 1985), and listen to children's descriptions through talk or demonstration about how they are learning to read (Stewart, 1986). Tutors also build on children's knowledge and background experiences, encouraging the activation of schemata for comprehending and remembering texts (Johnson & Pearson, 1984). Finally, instruction is centered on scaffolding of new constructs, whether by researcher to practitioner or by practitioner to student, because it is a powerful teaching and transference technique (Au & Kawakami, 1985, 1986; Brown & Palincsar, 1986; Gavelek, 1986).

Our principal research question was whether it is possible to construct a successful two-tiered early literacy model for guided learning in which intervention is transferred from researcher to teacher and from teacher to students. One aspect of the question was to compare children's literacy progress in classrooms where the ELP was implemented with those that continued a traditional kindergarten basal reading program. The study was carried out for two successive years, with results from the second year presented here. Treatment and control children were expected to differ in their use of and success with reading and writing strategies as a function of treatment teachers' presentation of the Morning Message, Predictable Little Book Reading, and Process Writing.

Method

Subjects and Measures

Six teachers participated for the first year (Cohort 1), and eight teachers for the second year (Cohort 2). Complete data were collected for 200 children. All teachers had five or more years of experience in teaching kindergarten and all were recommended by their principals. The schools were selected so that treatment classes were matched with geographically and economically similar control classes. The majority of children in the study were considered to be at risk for academic failure, based on low entering kindergarten test scores (Early Prevention of School Failure, Brigrance, or Boehm), school free lunch indices (80-90%), and high retention rates in kindergarten and first grade (10-22%).

Children's progress at the end of kindergarten was measured with tasks adapted by the first author from an early reading test (Mason & Stewart, 1990). The tasks included letter knowledge, spelling, reading familiar words, pseudoword reading, book reading, talk about reading and writing, book orientation, and writing. All measures were administered individually in a familiar setting. Intervention for Cohort 1 children occurred from January through May. Intervention for Cohort 2 children occurred from September through May. Preintervention measures were given to a sample of Cohort 1 treatment children and to all Cohort 2 treatment children. Posttest measures were given to all control and treatment kindergarten children at the end of the kindergarten year.

Cohort 1 treatment teachers learned to use the Morning Message, Predictable Little Books, and Trade Book Reading. Cohort 2 treatment teachers used these components and in the second semester learned to use Process Writing. Treatment and control teachers maintained a reading and language arts program with Silver Burdett & Ginn basal reading materials.

Training

Each component was introduced to treatment teachers by the first author, who modeled the techniques with each teacher's classroom as the teacher observed. Teachers also attended workshops to discuss general characteristics of the ELP, as well as the rationale for each component and effective methods of working with the children. Initially, the teachers saw videotapes from Hawaiian teachers implementing the Morning Message and the Process Writing (Kawakami & Wong, 1985). Because the ELP was adapted to incorporate characteristics of this population, on-site videotapes were made so that their own tapes could be the basis for discussion of each component.

The main thrust of the model was teacher-student communication embedded within scaffolding of all tasks. The instructional model for each component involved the following key elements:

- Modeling
- Background assessment
- Restructuring and building
- Comprehension activation
- Structural analysis (group and individual)
- Discussion
- Engagement
- Sharing

The order in which the key elements were used varied with the component as well as the particular situation and operated in a recursive manner. For example, modeling by the teacher or the child could occur at the beginning of the lesson and then again during structural analysis of the lesson. Depending on the child's level of understanding, building or restructuring of background understanding could occur throughout a lesson, rather than merely at the beginning.

Morning Message. The Morning Message was presented three to five times a week. In order to maintain teacher autonomy and decision making throughout the lessons, all messages were constructed by teachers (see Table 2), though some message words were chosen by the first author for all teachers to use. These words were added to the posttest in order to test for transference and progress in reading words out of context. Teachers also decided on order of presentation of words and message extension activities. They kept journals in which they stated the message and described their reactions to the children's comments and questions.

The structure for presenting the Morning Message was: (a) modeling of thinking, writing, and reading; (b) comprehension activation; (c) structural analysis; and (d) discussion. While the length of a message varied with each teacher, all messages increased in length and complexity over the school year. Usually the message reflected something current and relevant to the children. After modeling how to think about and then write the message, the teachers asked questions and gave assistance in structural analysis to provide clues for comprehension of the message. Next, they related comprehension activation questions to children's prior experiences, then activated children's knowledge about the message and kept children from becoming confused about the text content. Their structural analysis questions matched children's level of phonological understanding. For example, in the same lesson, one child might be asked to circle all words that began with a "c" while another was to find compound words or words within words. The teachers realized that they had to provide a measure of success at one level, inserting the necessary connections, before moving children to a more complex level. Children were allowed various formats of responding from calling out spontaneously to raising hands and waiting to be recognized. It was also customary for children to start calling out and predicting words as the teacher began writing the message on the chalkboard. Throughout the lessons, they were asked to exhibit their own understanding by volunteering to find something that they had decided was important, not just what the teacher had requested.

Predictable Little Book Reading. Predictable Little Book Reading training was initiated by the first author, who showed examples of little books, modeled the procedure with small groups of children in their classrooms, and explained the rationale behind the inclusion of each part of the instructional structure, drawing on work by Mason and McCormick (1981) and McCormick and Mason (1989a). Cohort 2 teachers also viewed videotapes of treatment teachers working with their own children during predictable book reading sessions. Teachers determined the composition of the small groups for instruction, usually choosing children who demonstrated a range of early reading behaviors.

The structure for presenting Predictable Little Book Reading was: (a) activation of prior knowledge; (b) discussion of what the children already knew about the subject; (c) reading the book aloud to the group; (d) rereading as children followed along in their own books; (e) group book reading and rereading; (f) structural analysis, during which individual children took turns reading words or sections of the books and answered questions about the graphics and word construction; and (g) discussion of the story with the teacher. The teachers were given copies of the little books (approximately 10-15 titles, from McCormick & Mason, 1989b) and were allowed to make copies for each child. The books are six pages in length and have no more than six words per page. Each story has some type of predictability with respect to the story line or ending.

In the year subsequent to the study, teachers were provided enlarged versions to go with each little book. They were allowed to introduce the books as they saw appropriate with respect to theme and difficulty level. Typically, they read the books with the children several times, not including independent or peer reading that often took place, before sending the books home to be read to parents and siblings.

Process Writing. When Process Writing was introduced, the teachers were hesitant about its implementation. They had all engaged in the usual types of writing in which they wrote experience stories on large chart paper or printed under a child's picture or had the children practice copying or forming letters. So, they believed that writing was too difficult for kindergarten children. A workshop was held to introduce the teachers to some of the current practices (Schickedanz, 1986; Teale, 1987;

Temple, Nathan, Burris, & Temple, 1988). Teachers brought samples of their students' writing, and the aspects of writing development and phonological awareness was discussed. The procedure was shown on a videotape and modeled in the classrooms. The writing sessions consisted of the following steps: (a) pre-discussion, (b) activation of existing knowledge for writing words, (c) writing, (d) individual teacher-child conferences, (e) sharing, (f) discussion, and (g) extension of writing. The procedure is similar to the process writing models for older children (Graves, 1983; Graves & Hansen, 1983), with some modification because of early literacy development characteristics.

Results

Children in the treatment classes outperformed children in control classes on nearly all of the reading and writing tasks administered at the end of kindergarten. Higher performance was obtained not only on measures that were specifically related to the treatment but also on measures that indicated generalization of basic literacy constructs. Furthermore, positive outcomes of the treatment occurred despite the fact that more children in treatment than control classes had been identified as being at high or moderate risk for academic failure. The results presented in Table 1 of Cohort 2 findings show highly significant differences on all measures except letter naming.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

The spelling task of six words (e.g., *pot, kite*) was made game-like by asking children to make the words using upper case magnetic letters. Young children's early spellings reflect their awareness of phonemes within words (Read, 1971). Because these early spelling attempts can be characterized as a developmental process (Ehri, 1989), the word-correct score was supplemented with a score based on the number of consonants children placed in a correct location. The maximum possible word score was 6, and the maximum possible consonant-match score was 14.

Both methods of scoring showed similar, highly significant end-of-year differences between the control and treatment children. Although neither group could spell many whole words correctly, treatment children were more able to make partially correct constructions. Teachers were able to see how students progressed with this task. The next year, some even provided magnetic letters and boards for children to use in the classroom.

The pseudoword task of eight three-letter words (e.g., *fam, mav, tak, ras*) taps children's emerging understanding of consonant-sound correspondences. The use of pseudowords, which are letter strings that conform to real letter cluster patterns, assures a set of items that are unknown to children being tested. Children with a deeper understanding of the connections between letters and their sounds will attempt to read them by matching initial or initial and final consonants to the word they say (e.g., reading *fam* as *fur* or *fun*, *tak* as *tick* or *toy*). Like the spelling task, responses give an indication of where children stand on the developmental path toward an understanding of letter-sound correspondences and whether they are beginning to use this essential construct to figure out new words. Both word-correct and consonant-match scores were created, making eight words and 16 consonants the maximum possible scores.

The results indicate that treatment children significantly outperformed control children on reading pseudowords. They read nearly one-third of the words correctly and matched nearly half the consonants, while control children performed less than half as well. These comparisons, in conjunction with the spelling results, reveal that treatment children were becoming aware of letter sounds and, although not facile, were using what they knew both to decode and encode words. Only a few control children were becoming able to utilize phonemes to read and spell words.

A letter-naming task containing 10 of the more common upper case and 10 lower case letters showed near-ceiling effects for both groups. Most children had learned to identify and label letters during the kindergarten year. As expected, because letter-naming was not a component of the ELP, the two groups performed similarly on the task.

Children read 16 familiar words, 8 high-frequency words (e.g., *at, go*), and 8 words from Morning Messages and Predictable Little Books (e.g., *mongoose, papaya*). The task was intended to evaluate the extent to which treatment children were learning words that they had seen in their reading and writing lessons. It was hoped that the children would develop an ability to read words out of context as they acquired an understanding of how words are formed and would begin to notice, learn, and remember words they had seen frequently (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). As with the pseudoword task, two scores were obtained, the number of words children read out of 16, and the number of correct consonant sounds used in their reading attempt (out of 26).

The results indicate that treatment children recognized nearly one-third of the words out of context. Moreover, their error responses were often words that contained the same consonants as the target words. For example, some treatment children called the word *mongoose monkey* or *morning*. Some called the word *lunch little* or *listen*. Control children often did not try to read these words and when they did, their miscues seldom had any letter-sound connection with target words. Some chose unrelated words that they had learned from the basal program.

The book reading task was given to see the extent to which the children understood how to read a book and could figure out some of the words in context. Children were given two new books to read and were asked questions about what and how they were trying to read (see Clay, 1985; or Mason & Stewart, 1990, for similar testing techniques). When asked to read these predictable books, which could be figured out read partly from the pictures and partly from repeated phrases, some kindergarten children looked at the pictures and labeled each picture. Some repeated the one-word title of the story for each page. Others elaborated on the pictures, constructing a story. Still others attempted to read by looking carefully at words and identifying a few words and phrases correctly. Scores were constructed based on these ways that children tried to read, as well as on the number of words and whole sentences read correctly.

The results determined that the treatment children outstripped control children on all of the book measures. They were able to read more words and sentences correctly, more likely to orient the books properly, more often knew the difference between the picture and the print, were more likely to attempt to read than to label pictures, and were more likely to say they used letter information than picture information or memory. Thus, treatment children were more likely to use appropriate information to try to read and were able to read more of the texts, figuring out more than half of the words and sentences correctly.

The writing task consisted of asking children to write something for the examiner and then to read it back. The scores indica d the extent to which their writing talk was connected to the drawing or writing. The higher the score, the closer to conventional writing.

The results from analyses of writing samples indicate that more children in the treatment classes than control classes were able to write something and to read or talk about what they had written in a more meaningful manner. In addition, the treatment children often tried to create a phrase, sentence, or story. When pictures were drawn, they added letters or words that were appropriate to the context. Children in the control classes were more likely to list one or two words they had learned in the basal program or put down unrelated strings of letters. Thus, treatment children were able to apply their emerging knowledge of phonology to the writing task, producing more elaborate and more meaningful written pieces.

Discussion

The results indicate that implementation of the ELP can lead to striking progress in kindergarten children's early literacy development. An intervention model can change teachers' behaviors and enable them to provide more effective instruction for kindergarten children. With the ELP, the Morning Message strategy exposes young children to meaningful print and structural analysis, extends reading and writing awareness, and allows the teacher to individualize instruction in a whole-class setting. Predictable Little Book reading promotes various early reading behaviors in small group instructional settings. Process writing provides an outpost for independent experimentation with print and using print functionally.

The ELP is presumed to work because of its carefully developed teacher training component in which instructional strategies were modeled for teachers, feedback was provided as teachers began to use the components, and teacher ownership of instructional strategies was promoted.

The Morning Message is a powerful lesson format. Although on the surface it appears to be something most kindergarten teachers use, it is far more complex. Comments by teachers in their journals (see Table 2) indicate that the teachers gradually realized the complexity of the component and took on the challenge of making it work. Over three months the number of words introduced in Morning Messages ranged from 122 to 187 (not including repetitions). When teachers wrote a message on the board they modeled how oral and written language are connected and written down. Children were able to see how oral language becomes a meaningful written message. The structural analysis that enabled children to figure out sections of the message also heightened their awareness of letters and sounds and enhanced their understanding of how to use context clues for comprehension.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

The Predictable Little Books component continued to extend children's understandings about print (e.g., front and back of book, direction for reading, print and picture connections, depiction of meaningful events) (Snow, 1986). The most important teaching element was for the teacher to know where to pitch the instruction so that it fit children's level of reading development. The teachers understood that their modeling promoted children's ability to draw conclusions about language and to draw inferences and make sense out of the print. The teachers learned when to be more explicit and provide children with pieces of information when they were ready to handle it, and they learned how to use appropriate questions to extend children's understanding. The teacher worked within each child's "zone of proximal development" by tailoring questions to children, giving immediate feedback to their answers, answering their questions, and allowing them to search for answers with the appropriate amount of scaffolding. Throughout the lessons the communication between the teacher and children was a partnership in the mediation of the learning process. The teacher's role involved guiding the children, many times indirectly, and providing assistance when needed. The ultimate goal, to help children become independent learners, became closer to realization with the use of Predictable Little Books.

During the Writing Process children were in a sense independent learners. After the prewriting discussions all children went to their desks and proceeded to write or draw. Since the children were constantly exposed to both oral and written language, this activity easily fit into the daily activities. The teachers used various techniques during the structural analysis that took place in individual conferences. Sometimes teachers assisted children by making them feel comfortable when they wrote a word they weren't sure about. With other children they indicated that there were other letters to represent sounds in the word that children didn't recognize or hear yet, and a line was drawn for those missing letters. As children progressed, they tried to construct various messages, some leaving spaces if they thought there were letters they couldn't hear. Some children used phonetic spellings, and made other improvements in their writing immediately after a Morning Message structural analysis session or after constructing words with peers or with the teacher on the magnetic boards.

Well-selected literacy activities and effective lesson formats allowed teachers to help children understand a number of aspects of written as well as oral language. Although oral language constructs were not measured, the program did encourage oral language through rereading of trade books, sharing of writing, reading and rereading of the Morning Message and Predictable Little Books. Another positive aspect of the ELP is that flexibility and teacher autonomy were built into the training and promoted. This must be the case if we expect the classroom to be a dynamic environment that is able to meet the varied needs of the children.

Implications

An early literacy program can lead to more effective teaching in kindergarten, which, in turn, can provide young children with rich and diverse early literacy experiences. The basic construct for this program lies within a positively-focused social interactive learning model. Instead of looking at children and deciding what they lack, teachers are taught to notice the wealth of knowledge the children come to kindergarten already possessing. Often children interact with adults and peers at home under different expectations than those at school (Heath, 1983). The ELP training helps teachers to communicate with their students at appropriate levels, and in more flexible ways. They observe them solving problems, they analyze their questions, and they provide information that stimulates them into constructing new knowledge as well as building on what they know. Because the ELP stresses modeling and observation of children's language awareness and makes literacy meaningful, teachers learn to create situations so that learning evolves through peer interactions and helpful scaffolding by fellow students or the teacher.

The ELP is embedded in ongoing assessment, thus preventing teachers from constructing static images of children's ability. Observing children's use of magnetic boards and letters, supervising writing centers, interacting with them during shared-book activities, and providing individual instruction during whole class sessions are some of the informal ways teachers learn to use assessment wisely as part of their everyday instruction. Then, when teachers see children's eyes light up with a glimmer of half understanding, they are better able to take advantage of those teachable moments. The ELP allows teachers to structure the environment and establish the appropriate situations for learning to occur among all of their students.

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Table 1
Posttest Comparisons of Treatment and Control Children's Early Literacy

Task	Treatment (N=103) X	SD	Control (N=97) X	SD	t	p
Spell Consonants (0-14)	7.79	4.47	5.47	4.34	3.61	.000
Spell Words (0-6)	.60	.88	.22	.46	3.82	.000
Consonants in Pseudowords (0-16)	7.98	6.75	3.79	5.71	4.59	.000
Read Pseudowords (0-8)	2.33	3.22	.81	2.05	3.88	.000
Letter Naming (0-20)	18.60	3.74	18.40	3.49	.38	.700
Consonants in Familiar Words (0-36)	13.89	10.51	5.01	6.06	7.14	.000
Read Familiar Words (0-16)	4.53	3.97	1.67	1.96	6.31	.000
Book Orientation (0-4)	3.71	.60	3.46	1.00	2.06	.041
Point to Print (0-6)	5.64	.96	5.20	1.62	2.25	.026
Talk About How to Read (0-6)	3.90	1.63	3.12	1.70	3.19	.002
Book Sentence Reading (0-12)	6.12	4.68	2.46	2.86	6.51	.000
Book Word Reading (0-26)	16.61	7.87	9.46	5.68	7.16	.000
Writing (0-6)	2.68	1.32	1.88	.90	4.89	.000
Attempt to Read Writing (0-4)	2.26	.95	1.95	.57	2.78	.006

Table 2

Morning Message Examples and Comments

January	
Comments:	We used the morning message everyday this week. The children enjoy and *expect* it each day. Even some of the children with shorter attention spans tune into (and stay tuned into) this morning activity. This is a bit surprising with a large class (25). All participating in one group activity. Each child wants to be one who might be able to circle a word, or find another word starting with the same letter.
February	
Comments:	Yesterday and today with the morning message I introduced new words. Today's word was 'this' and yesterday we had 'moon'. The children are coming up with some ideas they want me to include in the message such as "It's a breezy day," etc. Most just want me to include special classes we'll have each day. The children are able to differentiate between the words 'art,' 'music,' 'P.E.' and 'library'.
Message	Today I will read a book about dogs. The title of the book is *Go, Dog, Go*.
Comments:	Someone noticed that the word go was in dog. It's a difficult concept for them to understand that reading must always occur left to right. The children enjoyed the story and drew pictures to illustrate their favorite parts. They then dictated to me while I wrote what each picture was about.
March	
Message:	Hello, Let's read the story called *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*. You will like it.
Comments:	We had great fun with today's message. The children drew some pictures and wrote on their papers what the picture was about. Some had "two fish blue fish etc."
Message:	Hello everybody, we will do a lot of work today. We will have to learn some songs for our program next week. Today I will go to the market to buy a *papaya*.
Comments:	We talked about what a papaya is how they look outside and in and what color, size and shape the seeds are. We counted the a's and p's in papaya--something that even slower students could do.
May	
Message:	Good morning everybody. I have a new book to read to you. It is about Curious George. It is a funny book!
Comments:	First time we talked about exclamation marks like an upside down "i." I'm real proud of these kids!